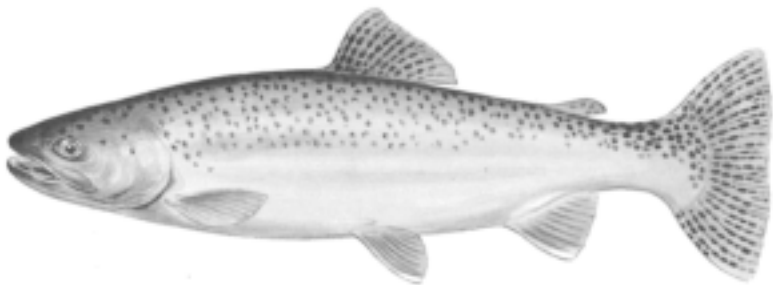


STEELHEAD RAINBOW TROUT  
*Salmo gairdnerii gairdnerii*

—from a painting by Charles Bradford Hudson, 1910

# STEELHEAD RAINBOW TROUT

*Salmo gairdnerii gairdnerii*



## DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS

*Adults returning to spawn:* The back and upper sides are usually gray. The sides become silvery toward the belly, which is white. There is very little reddish or violet on the sides or fins of fresh-run steelhead. Typically they are bright, silvery fish with relatively few spots along the back and on the dorsal and caudal fins.

*Adults at spawning time:* After the adults have been in the streams and rivers for several weeks their coloration becomes more like that of resident rainbow. They become much darker gray, the spotting becomes much more profuse, and often the side of the head and the lateral band become bright red.

*Young fish before entering the sea:* The colors are similar to those of the nonmigratory rainbow. The back is blue or olive gray, becoming silvery on the sides and white on the belly. The spots are numerous and vary from medium size to tiny specks. The dorsal and caudal fins are similarly spotted, but the other fins are usually unspotted. The ventral and anal fins are frequently pinkish. The dorsal and anal fins may be white tipped. The lateral band is not conspicuous, but may be light iridescent pink or violet.

The steelhead rainbow illustrated above is an adult fish returning from the ocean to spawn. The body spotting is often less pronounced than in the specimen shown here. A young steelhead which has not yet entered the sea will look more like the rainbow shown in the illustration on page 41.

## DISTRIBUTION IN CALIFORNIA

Steelhead rainbow may be found in most of the streams flowing into the ocean, from San Luis Obispo County north. In general, steelhead spawn in the smaller streams, rather than the main rivers. Frequently there are

barriers which prevent adult fish from reaching the spawning areas. Even when no such barriers exist, they rarely ascend to the headwaters, where the nonmigratory rainbow is commonly found.

### INTERESTING FACTS

The steelhead and the golden trout are the two most glamorous trout in California. The golden is known for its beauty and the steelhead for its quality as a game fish. Anyone who has taken a fresh-run steelhead on a fly and light tackle will never forget the experience.

A great many young steelhead are caught in fresh water before they have migrated downstream to the sea. These fish are commonly less than eight inches long and, of course, are not able to put up much of a battle. They usually enter the ocean when they are one or two years old and then spend from one to three years in the sea. When they come back to spawn they nearly always return to the stream in which they were hatched. At that time they may weigh from two to twelve pounds or more.

During the winter or early spring the spawning fish reach suitable gravel riffles in the upper sections of streams and dig their nests.

This trout was described by Sir John Richardson from individuals caught near the mouth of the Columbia River in 1836 and was named for Dr. Meredith Gairdner, a naturalist in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company.



*The beautiful Smith River in Del Norte County is California's most northerly steelhead stream.*